



**Sandia
National
Laboratories**

2021-2022 Remote Work Study Final Results

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1. STUDY OVERVIEW AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organizations—from national laboratories to private companies—to change their workforce model to incorporate remote work. This study and the summarized results sought to understand the experiences of remote workers and the ways that remote work can impact recruitment and retention, employee engagement, and career development. Sandia, like many companies, has committed to establishing a hybrid work model that will persist post-pandemic, and more Sandia employees than ever before have initiated remote work agreements. This parallels the nationwide increase in remote employment and motivates this study on remote work as an enduring part of workforce models.

Key Takeaways

- Organizations are still figuring out the hybrid work approach; the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that companies are agile and able to pivot to meet deliverables but should continue to proactively share information as to how hybrid work is (or isn't) working.
- This study validated the ability of remote work positions to improve recruitment; a pilot showed significant increases in the number of qualified candidates applying for a remote position that was identical to an onsite position. Remote work options are necessary to remain competitive in the future.
- The organizational culture drives the success of the remote work model; workplace cultures need to co-evolve with the changing workforce model.

2. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

A multi-pronged approach was used to collect and analyze data:

- A comprehensive survey of Sandia employees with remote work agreements on file **Error! Reference source not found.** **Error! Reference source not found.** **Error! Reference source not found.** **Error! Reference source not found.**
- Focus groups of both remote workers and managers of remote workers
- Benchmarking interviews with 12 external organizations about current and future work postures and a literature review

The primary finding of the 2021–22 Enabling Virtual Work Study is that remote work has demonstrated the ability to adapt and pivot to sustain business operations and productivity. Remote work provides benefits to both the employer and to individual remote workers, and employers like Sandia should seek to embrace its remote workforce by addressing key pain points and creating positive messaging about the emerging hybrid model of work. In so doing, Sandia and other employers can improve their innovation, competitiveness, and ability to meet corporate goals.

2.1. External Benchmarking

External benchmarking revealed creative ways by which employers are solving problems around collaboration, culture shifts, and career development. Pain points and uncertainty still exist; however, the ability to attract and retain diverse talent drives the interviewed companies to find ways to create remote opportunities for existing and potential employees.

- All organizations wonder what the future will look like, and many asked to hear back from Sandia about our findings.
- All interviewed organizations agreed that remote work options can be a recruitment and retention tool.
- Moving forward, focus will be on *when* people work, just as much as *where* people work.
- Organizations determined who can work remotely in many ways, from job type to manager opinions, to team considerations, to automated tools, to persona-based designations, to employee decisions. Thriving as a remote worker depends on both the person and role.
- Onboarding, teaming, and inclusion were consistent issues cited by all organizations.
- Organizations are leveraging their remote workforce to build partnerships and engage with key stakeholders in strategic locations.

At the time of the study, organizations were generally in a more fully remote work posture. There was divergence in organizations' plans for future workforce postures. Some expressed plans to shift to a hybrid work model requiring employees to report on-site several days per week while others planned to expand to a fully remote workforce posture with no requirement for on-site presence.

2.2. Sandia Remote Worker Survey

Sandia survey results indicated that while many remote workers recently transitioned to remote work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, pockets of experienced remote workers are present

throughout Sandia. Overall, remote workers view working for Sandia positively, but there remains room for improvement such areas as professional development and career opportunities.

- A significant portion of remote workers wish to connect with one another, but do not know how to find one another.
- Uncertainty around which jobs are remote-compatible limits the ability of remote workers to move within and across different departments (often available to on-site employees).
- Management support is very important to positive remote work experiences.
- Issues like loneliness, ease of equipment acquisition, ability to unplug after work, and reconciliation of time zones and remote workers' scheduled hours of work were found to be persistent problems that had profound impact on satisfaction.

2.3. Sandia Remote Work Focus Groups

The themes emerging from the focus groups ranged from team integration to networking and new work. In general, managers and remote workers tended to place similar levels of attention on topics like communication, tools and resources, and management tactics and actions. However, there were disparities in how often managers and remote workers discussed subjects like performance and productivity, promotions, and recruitment and retention.

- Both managers and employees viewed remote work as beneficial in that it provides needed flexibility for workers who would otherwise separate from Sandia, without any detrimental effects on productivity. Moreover, remote workers can be seen as a nationwide asset.
- Online collaboration tools have become quintessential; their use will need to continue.
- Challenges exist around onboarding and IT, inability to do classified work, and difficulty maintaining work–life balance.
- Remote workers perceived job insecurity because of a lack of consistent, positive messaging about remote work, and the subjectivity in determining whether a role can be filled remotely.
- Networking and team inclusion are difficult for remote workers.
- All focus group participants said remote work helps to recruit and retain high quality talent.

3. BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORK

Despite a steep learning curve imposed by COVID-19, our analysis revealed many actualized benefits in relation to the remote workplace.

- Remote work options are already improving recruitment and can be leveraged to increase competitiveness to obtain top talent, especially for critical skills (e.g., computer science, cybersecurity, computer or electrical engineering) positions. Remote work options help retain talent.
- Learn and capitalize on experience of long-term remote workers and hybrid teams.
- When remote workers feel supported by their managers, they tend to be productive and loyal employees, reporting gratitude for the ability to work remotely rather than having to separate because of external circumstances.
- Remote workers appreciate and continue to participate in growth opportunities, new skill development, training, and participation in professional organizations.
- Despite the challenges of staying connected, remote workers continue to collaborate and communicate with colleagues and emphasize the usefulness of videoconferencing tools. Moreover, their location across the US means that they are, at times, better able to meet partners in person and attract new talent.
- Groups across the country are attempting to forge hybrid workforces, capitalize on the creative solutions being implemented by sharing experiences and tactics for remote work.

4. IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Challenges identified through this study range from high-level institutional challenges to day-to-day technical challenges that impede remote workers' ability to integrate and achieve. These challenges can be clustered into five themes (institutional, culture, career development, interpersonal, and technical) and may be applicable to other organizations.

4.1. Institutional Challenges

- Employers who fail to offer, expand, and advertise remote work options, will become less competitive as an employer in the coming years.
- Remote work could help alleviate space challenges with primary site work location.
- The experience of those who have been working remotely for a long time may not yet be collected and tapped for possible career development models.
- Team dynamics, the division of work assignments, and team productivity may require attention and monitoring as organizations shift to hybrid work.

4.2. Culture Challenges

- Remote work may be perceived as a benefit for the employee instead of a mutually beneficial arrangement. This contributes to inconsistent views and resistance to the implementation of remote work.
- Organizations requiring most employees to return to the office may result in isolation of remote workers. In addition, it was also observed that stigmas remain as to remote workers being “less productive” and “receiving a benefit” which entrenches on-site-only culture.
- Long-term remote work strategies need to be socialized (employee and management levels). Without consistent and communicated policies, job security will remain ambiguous. Buy-in from all levels of leadership is needed to create explicit and consistent remote work policies.

4.3. Career Development Challenges

- Existing career development systems and policies are generally geared to traditional pathways and models; these will need rethinking and retooling.
- Some remote workers feel that their ability to progress in their careers is impeded by their remote status (e.g., inability to work on certain technical or classified projects).
- Stories of remote worker excellence and advancement are not visible or celebrated.
- Remote workers experience a sense of uncertainty in terms of job security (e.g., retracting remote work agreements).

4.4. Interpersonal Challenges

- Loneliness and isolation are commonly felt by remote workers. Remote workers report lack of knowledge about other remote co-workers and/or how to connect with them.
- Remote workers feel as though they need to be always accessible online, reporting limited focused work time and higher stress levels.

- Remote workers find it difficult to maintain scheduled work hours when in diverse time zones.
- Unplugging outside of work remains difficult for remote workers, and overworking is common. While remote workers are able to attend more meetings because of commuting efficiency, having too many virtual meetings is exhausting and leads to burnout.
- Virtual workers can feel a lack of inclusion in team celebrations and are unable to participate in informal “watercooler” conversations. Proposed virtual substitutes for these interactions garnered mixed reviews.

4.5. Technical Challenges

- Onboarding was cited as an issue for both remote workers (who wished onboarding was more extensive) and managers of remote workers (who worried that employee integration and work culture isn’t properly imposed virtually.)
- Timely IT support for remote workers remains a challenge and leads to lost productive hours.
- For employers with purchasing restrictions/preferred vendors, the inability to acquire technology locally and be reimbursed results in significant lost time for remote workers.
- Both Managers and remote workers lack familiarity with tools and resources available to them.

5. CONCLUSION

Organizations are still figuring out the hybrid work approach; the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that companies are agile and able to pivot to meet deliverables but should continue to proactively share information as to how hybrid work is (or isn't) working. In the spirit of this sharing, this report summarizes findings on benefits and challenges of remote work.